

A STUDY OF  
AMATEUR THEATRE IN TORONTO:  
1900 - 1930

by

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Another local director, Mrs. Scott Raff, also made some outstanding contributions to amateur theatre in the city. An instructor at Victoria University<sup>1</sup> and an elocution teacher at the Toronto College of Music,<sup>2</sup> she, above all others in her field, realized the importance of the spoken word and its relationship to drama. As she saw it, "literature could become a living art through the medium of voice."<sup>3</sup> Her own public readings and dramatic sketches<sup>4</sup> established her reputation as a fine elocutionist and gave concrete evidence of her view that speech is the most vital element of drama. On the one hand, she reacted against the tide of realism which concentrated on mise en scene and construction rather than on dialogue;<sup>5</sup> on the other, she sought the more idealistic goal of restoring the art of precise, articulate delivery on the stage. Indeed, she had already turned her efforts to various amateur organizations around the city, but it was not

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<sup>1</sup>Dorothy M. R. Jackson, A Brief History of Three Schools: The School of Expression, The Margaret Eaton School of Literature and Expression, The Margaret Eaton School, 1901-1941 (Toronto, 1953), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Globe, Toronto (May 28, 1901), p. 12. See also World, Toronto (April 18, 1900), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup>Jackson, The Brief History of Three Schools, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>Globe, Toronto (May 28, 1901), p. 12. See also World, Toronto (April 18, 1900), p. 8.

<sup>5</sup>Edna Purdie, "Speech," The Oxford Companion to the English Language, Payllis Hartnoll, ed. (London: Oxford, 1957), p. 761.



until she opened her own school the following autumn that she could put her theories into practice.<sup>1</sup>

Urged on by the Reverend Nathaniel Burwash, Chancellor of Victoria University, she opened her new School of Expression in 1901, at the corner of Yonge and Bloor Streets in a studio over what is now the Bank of Commerce. There she intended to guide her students in "the interpretation of literature, the problems of voice production and the promotion of physical education;" not only was she prepared to "improve the quality of the voice" and "the health and grace of the body," but she was also concerned with stimulating the imaginativeness of her students as well as developing their "artistic aptitudes."<sup>2</sup> Her curriculum indicated a significant shift from the pure physical culture and voice training programs offered in the other elocution schools to a more erudite study of literature and the creative arts with the result that those enrolled at the school would be acquainted with dramatic literature at first hand in play productions and readings.

Although Mrs. Scott Raff's School of Expression did not produce anything of consequence in its first year,

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<sup>1</sup>Jackson, The Brief History of Three Schools, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.



the new interest in the appreciation of the theatre as an art form showed some affinities to the recent movements which were gaining acceptance abroad in such places as Paris where in 1887 Andre Antoine had established the Théâtre-libre and thus proved the advantages of intimate theatre. Antoine and Otto Brahm in his Freie Bühne rebelled against the old conventions which persisted, and both, by encouraging experimentation in staging, production and playwrighting, attempted to inject new life into the theatre.<sup>1</sup>

There is no question that Mrs. Scott Raff was aware of these latest trends, for in the years to follow she was one of those in Toronto dedicated to the production of new plays and the use of new techniques. In spite of her far-sightedness, she always maintained the established principles of elocution with the result that much of her work in the theatre was devoted to the production of poetic drama which would give full scope to the voice. Mrs. Scott Raff was not prepared to go as far as some of the avant garde organizations in the United States, but this is only natural because she was running a school of elocution, not a theatre laboratory.

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<sup>1</sup>Kenneth McGowan and William Melnitz, The Living Stage (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1955), pp. 400-406.



The School of Expression was affiliated with Victoria University, and the students (all girls) attended their physical education classes at Annesley Hall.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the very modern aspects of the curriculum, an air of the old order hung heavily over the school, as revealed by its crest (a Greek torch encircled by a laurel wreath) and its motto ("A Sound Mind in a Sound Body").<sup>2</sup>

The school's emphasis on the Grecian concept of personal harmony through the fulfillment of body, mind and spirit apparently reflected a current revival of interest in Greek thought already evident in other aspects of Victorian culture, most notably in the work of such writers as Hardy and Swinburne, who were so enamoured of "Greek and classical beauty."<sup>3</sup>

The same preoccupation with the Grecian ideal of harmony can also be seen in such aspects of local life as the many local children's productions and classical plays at the university which featured eurhythmics. Similar attitudes were seen several years later in the masques of

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<sup>1</sup>Jackson, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, A History of English Literature. Revised ed. (London: Dent, 1957), p. 1259.



Bliss Carman and Mary Perry King, particularly in their Daughters of Dawn, in which "the three rhythmic arts, poetry, music, and dancing, or interpretive motion are combined for artistic and cultural purposes."<sup>1</sup>

With the Greek temperament so much in evidence in late nineteenth century life, it is apparent that the ancients' love of order gave equilibrium to the age in which "the Victorian feeling of balance was beginning to question itself."<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Musical Entertainment

Music was a popular form of entertainment in the city, and like the theatre, it was quick to react to prevailing attitudes and current events. Thus, in the war years, travelling military bands drew large audiences to patriotic functions; when the Queen died, local entertainment tended to be of a more solemn kind given mostly to piano and singing recitals; at Easter and Christmas, oratorios and cantatas (directed by such well-known choir-masters as Torrington, Ham, Vogt and Forsyth) appeared in abundance, and in the summer, local parks were alive with outdoor concerts.

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<sup>1</sup>Bliss Carman and Mary Perry King, Daughters of Dawn (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1913), introduction, p. v.

<sup>2</sup>Legouis and Cazanien, p. 1259.



is stage name "Harold Nelson," Mr. Shaw and his company struggled to bring drama to Winnipeg and the west coast, undergoing conditions that had discouraged many other travelling troupes in earlier days. "He preached Shakespeare to rough cow punchers, and preached with intelligence and sympathy. He lectured to schools and to colleges on the drama, and incited owners of halls and 'opr'ys' to build better ones,"<sup>1</sup> and within six or seven years Mr. Shaw was winning the appreciation that he had previously won in the East.<sup>2</sup>

The cessation of ~~dramatics~~ at the Toronto College of Music marked the end of an annual event that had always been regarded as a highlight of the theatrical season. Since such organizations as the Metropolitan College of Music concentrated on speech recitals and dramatic recitations, the only other institution to display an interest in play production was Mrs. Scott Ruff's School of Expression. By 1904-5, it had become obvious to Mrs. Scott Ruff that her small studio could no longer accommodate the large number of students enrolled in the dramatic and physical culture classes, so she decided to do something about it.

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<sup>1</sup>Robson Black [Frederic Robson], "The Romance of the Theatre in Canada," Canada West Monthly, VI(May, 1909), 16.

<sup>2</sup>Frederic Robson, "The Drama in Canada," Canadian Magazine (May, 1908), pp. 59-60.



Miss Dorothy Jackson, historian of the school, recounts the incidents which follow:

Mrs. Scott Raff recorded that Mr. Timothy Eaton, at his summer residence in Muskoka, said to her: "Go to Toronto and get Dr. Burwash to go with you, and buy land for a school in which to incorporate your teaching."

Action on this suggestion was taken at once, Land was secured and a building erected on North Street, now Bay Street, just south of Bloor Street, Mr. Harry McGee was appointed as representative of the T. Eaton Company Limited to confer on the plans. The architect was Mr. W. R. Mead, and Thomson Brothers were the builders. Land, building and furnishings were the gift of Mr. Timothy Eaton for his wife. In 1906, a charter of incorporation as a School was obtained, and in honour of Mrs. Eaton, the School was named:

The Margaret Eaton School of  
Literature and Expression.

The handsome grey stone building with imposing Greek pillars, was considered to be one of the finest examples of pure Grecian architecture on this continent. In Toronto it was referred to as "The Greek Temple." The impressive entrance was supplemented in the interior by panelled halls and furniture of clean-cut subdued lines. The recital hall and administrative offices were located on the ground floor; the principal's studio on the second floor. Appropriately, the caretaker was named "Hermes."<sup>1</sup>

Of course, the theatre in the Margaret Eaton School of Expression and Literature was quite unlike the Winthrop Ames enterprise of a few years later; nevertheless, the

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<sup>1</sup>Dorothy Jackson, A Brief History of Three Schools: The School of Expression, The Margaret Eaton School of Literature and Expression, The Margaret Eaton School, 1901 - 1941 (Toronto, 1953), pp. 8-9.



establishment of a theatre designed for the intimate production of the best in drama represented something of a landmark in the city and probably the nation. "The best in drama" was a far cry from the advanced material which was shown at the New Theatre in New York, but the forthcoming years saw the Margaret Eaton School become the centre for many of the most progressive dramatic presentations taking place in Toronto. The founding of the Margaret Eaton School can now be regarded as the formal beginning of the Little Theatre movement in Toronto.

Since the construction of the new school occupied nearly the full 1905-6 season, Mrs. Scott Raff continued to conduct classes in her old studio.

The Eatons, the Masseys and Amateur Theatre

It is highly improbable, considering Timothy Eaton's strict Methodist background, that the gift of the Margaret Eaton School was made because of some deep-felt concern over the situation in professional theatre. Rather it is more likely that the gift was made at the insistence of his beloved wife who had always maintained an avid interest in the drama despite her husband's disfavour.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Eaton's

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<sup>1</sup> In April, 1906, her home was the meeting place for the closing exercises of the Shakespeare Club, which had a very large membership. The gathering witnessed the presentation of scenes from plays directed by Mrs. Scott Raff. Globe, Toronto (April 21, 1906), p. 11.





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